

SIX FILIPINOS AND ONE AMERICAN:
PIONEERS OF
THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD IN THE PHILIPPINES¹

Trinidad E. Seleký

The Assemblies of God is one of the fastest growing Pentecostal groups in the Philippines today. In its June 4, 2000 issue, the *Pentecostal Evangel* reports that the Philippines General Council of the Assemblies of God (PGCAG) has “1,230 churches with 198,000 members and adherents to 2,600 churches attended by 420,830 people.”²

The following article traces the growth of the PGCAG from its humble beginnings back in the 1900s. It discusses the background of six Filipinos and one American who pioneered the movement. It highlights the contributions of these seven men to the growth of the denomination.

The author was an eyewitness of what the Lord did to make the PGCAG grow. Rev. Trinidad Esperanza Selekey was the sister of Rodrigo Esperanza, the first general superintendent of the PGCAG. She was a veteran Filipino educator who earned her Master of Religious Education from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, where she wrote a thesis, perhaps the very first scholarly attempt to present an early history of the denomination. She was considered an exemplary educator, administrator and scholar in Philippines Evangelicalism and Pentecostal churches.

¹ This article is part of the author’s thesis, (Trinidad C. Esperanza,) “The Assemblies of God in the Philippines” (Master’s thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, 1965). The introduction was written by Lemuel Engcoy.

² John W. Kennedy, “Embracing the Change,” *Pentecostal Evangel* (June 4, 2000), pp. 4-12 (5).

The first few years of the Assemblies of God in the States were hard years. World War I had effects on the United States and its possessions. Missionary giving was not enough to meet the tremendous challenge of the mission fields for new recruits and replacements. However, events worked out in establishing the Assemblies of God in the Philippines.

Soon after the beginning of World War I, European immigration to the States began to be curtailed. Labor recruiting agencies turned their drawing power to the Filipinos. Advantages offered by life in the States were advertised. Steamship companies told exaggerated stories of "streets strewn with gold" which credulous and ignorant folks readily believed. The public school system, established since the American occupation of the Philippines, also gave a great impetus to Filipino emigration. American teachers and textbooks described the greatness of the United States. English was being taught from the first grade. Prospects of going abroad and pursuing studies as a self-supporting student in the United States was a common topic of conversation among high school students. Bruno Lasker says,

For those unfamiliar with colonial sentiment in other parts of the world, it may be difficult to realize the extra-ordinary desire of the Filipinos, after a quarter of a century of American occupation, to get into closer touch with the great country of which they were taught to consider themselves a part. It was as though thousands but waited for the opportunity to realize a long cherished hope.³

The estimate of the total net increase of Filipino migration to the United States and Hawaii from January 1920 to December 1929 was 81,149.⁴ Of this number, many were Filipinos who were saved and who received the Pentecostal outpouring. They became missionaries to their own people and pioneered the work of the Assemblies of God in the Philippines. A record exists of the work and testimonies of many of the leaders.⁵ Before their return to the homeland, however, an American family brought the Pentecostal message to this island nation.

³ Bruno Lasker, *Filipino Immigration to Continental United States and to Hawaii* (Chicago: American Council Institute of Pacific Relations, University of Chicago Press, 1931), p. 221.

⁴ Lasker, *Filipino Immigration*, p. 347.

⁵ Much of the source-material for the accounts of the Filipino pioneers has been obtained from the publications, *The Voice of the Visayan District Council of the Assemblies of God* and the *Pentecostal Voice*. Additional material has come from

1. Benjamin Caudle

Benjamin H. Caudle and his family received appointment from the Foreign Missions Department of the U.S. Assemblies of God in Springfield, Missouri on December 30, 1925 as the first Assemblies of God missionaries to the Philippines. They arrived in Manila in September 1926 and rented a place in Leveriza Street, Malate District. Benjamin Caudle began his missionary work in English, while engaging in language study of Spanish and Tagalog. He distributed large numbers of tracts and other Assembly of God literature on the streets, in the parks of Manila and outlying villages. He also preached in the markets and on the streets of the surrounding towns. The Caudles conducted evangelistic ministry in their home and backyard. They had fifty-five in Sunday school, mostly children. Benjamin Caudle conducted a Bible class once a week, which some young men from high school and the nearby University of the Philippines attended. Then the hot season of the year came which was very trying to Mrs. Caudle's health. Together with her duties in the home and her part of the work in the ministry, her health broke. They returned to the States with no one to continue the work they had started.⁶

2. Cris Garsulao

Cris Garsulao was a trailblazer. Born in Antique Province in the island of Panay, he went to the United States in the year 1910 with ambitions to become a civil engineer. While an engineering student in a university, he stopped to listen to the gospel being preached in a street meeting. To him it was "good news" indeed. After receiving Christ as his personal Savior, he purposed in his heart to do God's will and prayed for God's guidance in his life's work. He soon knew that God had called him to do a greater work than building roads or bridges. He enrolled in Glad Tidings Bible Institute, an Assemblies of God school in San Francisco, to prepare himself for the ministry.

personal testimonies written by the Pioneers themselves to the writer of this thesis.

⁶ Noel Perkin, "Coordination and Advance (1925-1930)," *The Pentecostal Evangel* (December 27, 1964) and a letter from B. H. Caudle to Noel Perkin, January 12, 1965.

With confidence that God would help him do the work to which he had been called, he returned to his home barrio, Villar, Sibalom in 1928. His brother and sisters and many others accepted Christ as their Savior and also received the Pentecostal experience. They helped him evangelize neighboring barrios. Work was started in Cadolonan, San Remegio, a growing church in the following years.

The next year, Cris Garsulao opened a Bible training school in his hometown, Sibalom, Antique. He realized the need of trained workers to evangelize the whole province. For two years he faithfully taught nine students the word of God and led them in practical work. Four of the nine students continued in Christian service.

In 1933, Cris Garsulao returned to the States, and in a year went back to the Philippines with a tent for evangelistic meetings. He launched into a more extensive and intensive evangelistic program. Lasting about a month in each place, campaigns were held in Cadajug, Laua-an; Igburi, Patnongon; Tagbacan, Sibalom, and Dao area. The souls saved in each of these places formed the nucleus for new churches. Cris Garsulao's heavy schedule took a toll on his health and in 1935, after a month of severe illness, God called him home. The foundation, which he laid for the Pentecostal churches in Antique, remains to this day.⁷

3. Pedro Collado

Pedro Collado was depressed with diverse difficulties. Not knowing which way to turn for comfort, he dropped into the Life Line Gospel Mission in San Francisco, California. The words, "You must be born again," pricked his heart. For two weeks he continue to attend the services with resolve to seek the God that the preacher was describing. On June 14, 1927 he responded to the altar call and repeated the sinner's prayer after the pastor. He went back to his room rejoicing. He knew he was born again.

After graduating from Glad Tidings Bible Institute in 1930, he pastored the Filipino Lighthouse Mission in Stockton, California. God blessed his ministry among his own people. Believers multiplied. Some of the Filipinos saved thought it wise to organize themselves under the Assemblies of God. Pedro Collado was delegated to talk over the matter with the officers of the Northern California and Nevada District Council.

⁷ Warren. B. Dentlon, "A History of the Assemblies of God in Antique," *The Voice of the Visayan District Council of the Assemblies of God* (Nov. 1955).

On July 1-7, 1933 they had their organizational convention in Stockton. They named themselves the "Filipino Assemblies of the Firstborn, Inc." and Pedro Collado was elected superintendent. This was the first time the Pentecostal Filipinos in the States organized themselves into a religious body.⁸

Visions for the lost in his homeland impelled Collado to leave the States in March 1935. For the next three months he preached to his brothers and sisters in Bagumbayan, Nueva Ecija. He was a pattern of good works and in doctrine so that his folk had nothing to say against him. He had the joy of seeing them accept Christ. Then he left them and went to Sibalom, Antique to pastor the flock left behind by Cris Garsulao.

Subsequently, when his people moved to Mindanao as homeseekers, Pedro Collado followed them to Katidtoan, Pikit, Cotabato, then to Marbel, Koronadal where the National Land Settlement Administration was distributing farm lots to qualified applicants. His folk were assigned Banga, Ala Valley Project, a virgin fertile land. In all these moves, Pedro was a true spiritual leader. He distributed tracts, did personal evangelism, preached in bunkhouses, held open-air meetings, and did house-to-house visitations. It was rough pioneering life fraught with hardships and disease. Many were constantly discouraged but the grace of God sustained him. He was a brave soul as the first Pentecostal preacher in Mindanao, the land of promise for Filipinos, while false cults opposed him. And yet, he pressed on and revival fires spread, sinners were converted and sick bodies healed. God confirmed the word with signs following.

4. Benito Acena

Benito Acena was born in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, a stronghold of Catholicism in northern Luzon. He was converted in California under the ministry of Mrs. Reullura Harness, a member of the Assemblies of God Church in Dinuba, California. After graduating from Glad Tidings Bible Institute in 1931 he became assistant pastor of a Spanish mission in San Jose. Later he pastored the Filipino Church in Watsonville. He was ordained to full time ministry in June 1934.

⁸ The Filipino Assemblies of the Firstborn, Inc. later on became independent from the Assemblies of God.

One day while riding to work with other men, the car turned over. They just got themselves out before the car was in flames. Acena took this incident as a warrant of arrest for his disobedience. Behind a house nearby where the accident happened, he thanked God for sparing his life and promised him that he would obey His command to go home to the Philippines.

In November 1935 he left San Francisco. All across the Pacific, prayer had been made without ceasing for his country and people. For a year he did his best to witness to his brothers and sisters and other relatives. He found the verse, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house" (Mark 6:4), to be true in his case. No one knew exactly how sad he was.

Refusing to be discouraged, he prayed for God's guidance. He had a divine urge to move on. On New Year's Day 1936 God led Acena to La Paz, Laoag, Ilocos Norte. He found some hungry hearts for the word. God confirmed his preaching with miraculous demonstrations of the Holy Spirit. In two months, he baptized in water his first fourteen converts. Zealous new believers accompanied him in evangelistic meetings in the town of Dingras and the barrios of Sidiran, Baldias, Sagpatan, and Bangay. Most of the time they went to these places by foot. An incident happened that marked the beginning of a great spiritual awakening: a woman who was dying was prayed for and she soon recovered. People flocked to his services.

Acena saw the need of training the young people for service. He conducted classes in doctrine, personal work, and homiletics.

The rapid growth of the work was attributed to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during their all-night prayer meetings. In La Paz, the believers met by the seashore; in the rice fields of San Nicolas; by a river in Dingras and in the forest of Solsona. No human words could fully describe the wonderful growth in grace and faith among the young believers. In a year, three churches were built: in Lisud, Sarrat; La Paz, Laoag and Bangay, Dingras.

5. Rosendo Alcantara

Rosendo Alcantara from Aringay, La Union was born, reared, and educated as a Roman Catholic with plans to become a priest. At the age of twenty he went to the United States to work. One day his car turned over. He lay dying under the car. He called on the Christ of the Pentecostal preachers from the Upper Room Mission in San Jose,

California who used to go and preach in his camp. Alcantara had opposed and hated the preacher bitterly. As he breathed the prayer, a carload of men stopped by, lifted his car and brought him to the hospital for an operation. For the first time in his life, he saw the power of a Christ who can save from death.

Released from the hospital, he went to Sunnyville to stay with friends. An old woman invited him to a Pentecostal church there. The third night he attended, while listening to the message, he saw a vision of Christ clothed in pure white descending above the pulpit. In the light of Christ's purity he realized his own filthiness. He arose to his feet and wept bitterly. The people thought his operation was hurting him, but he told them about his vision. They led him to the altar where he confessed his sins and received Christ's forgiveness.

He enrolled in the correspondence course of Southern Bible College in Fort Worth, Texas and then of Central Bible Institute, Springfield, Missouri. Meanwhile, he moved to Los Angeles and joined Bethel Temple. He was an active member of the Christ's Ambassadors group. More and more he was convinced that God saved him to preach. With a license to exhort from the Southern California and Arizona District Council of the Assemblies of God, he held meetings among the Filipinos in California and Hawaii.

Then God put a burden in Alcantara's heart for the salvation of his parents. Devout Catholics that they were, it was not easy to approach them. He recalled how prejudiced he was against Pentecostal preachers in his camp. Had he not clenched his fist and raised his hand to strike the preachers? That foreboding thought haunted him. But then putting aside his fears he would say to himself, "Isn't Christ the Mighty One who can save to the uttermost?" God told him to go home to the Philippines. He was willing to obey, but he had no money for his fare. He had deposited his money in a bank, but the bank went into bankruptcy. The pastor of Bethel Temple, Los Angeles heard of his predicament and invited him to speak in the Sunday night service. God provided his fare by a love offering from the congregation.

Faith triumphed over doubt. Rosendo Alcantara began preaching to his parents in his hometown. Then he went to Dingras, Ilocos Norte where he built a church in Bangay, and helped in the gospel work in northern Luzon.

6. Eugenio M. Suede

Eugenio M. Suede was born in Cancelayan, Pototan, Iloilo, Philippines on June 12, 1904. His parents were rabid Roman Catholics and some of his nearest kinfolks were Roman Catholic priests. Ambitions to go around the world made him join the United States Navy in 1920. While his ship was under repair in Brooklyn, New York, he saw a picture of Mrs. Reullura Harness on the cover of a magazine about the Philippines published in Washington, D.C. She was garbed with the mestiza dress worn by Filipino women, which has a long skirt, with big butterfly sleeves and topped by a *panuelo* (large handkerchief). She was standing in the midst of a group of Filipino children. Below the picture were the words, "American Mother, Mother to the Filipinos." Suede's heart was captivated. Being an orphan he wished to have an American mother. He wrote her a nice letter, and a poem dedicated to her. A week later he received a small Bible from her. The first thing he learned from the Bible was the Lord's prayer.

On August 19, 1933 Eugenio Suede received a telegram from Mrs. Harness in Los Angeles, California. "Come, son. Meet me in Angeles Temple, dressed in white." His ship sailed for a month from New York via the Panama Canal to San Pedro, California. He immediately went to Angelus Temple in Los Angeles and met Mrs. Harness for the first time. She invited him to come back the following Sunday. Suede returned and became a new creature in Christ. He resigned from the Navy and went to Watsonville, California where he found another American mother, Ruth Snow, who nurtured him in the word of God and urged him to go to Bible school.

Suede enrolled in Glad Tidings Bible Institute. After his graduation he went to New York City as an evangelist with a full schedule. He was back in his home province, Iloilo, on December 12, 1936. He began work in Cabudian, Duenas, Iloilo where he built a church under Baptist leadership. In Jaguimit, Duenas, he built the first Assemblies of God church in the province of Iloilo. This church was burned by the Japanese in 1942 but was rebuilt in 1955. Suede's first convert in Jaguimit was his mother-in-law who was blind and almost 100 years old. In 1947 a beautiful church was built in the town of Duenas. Governor Mariano Penaflorida of Iloilo Province was guest speaker during the church dedication on May 12, 1949. Opposition accompanied Suede's ministry. For some years the town mayor of Duenas was against his type of ministry. The Roman Catholic priest accused him to the governor but he won the case. In Alinsolong, Batad, Iloilo the son of a rich man who

owned the barrio stoned Suede and his group while they were conducting an open-air meeting. The man watched him closely with a carbine gun trying to find occasion to shoot him. In his preaching trips to neighboring provinces, he was almost stabbed with a bolo [a long jungle knife – editor] by a drunken man in Cadolonan, San Remegio, Antique. A rain of stones fell upon the church while he was preaching. Dramatic was the scene when Blas Marfil, the leader of the stoning, was convicted of his sins, ran to the altar with a stone in his hand, and cried for the salvation of his soul. Later Marfil became a Sunday school teacher in his church and five of his children have been in the ministry.

7. Rodrigo C. Esperanza

Rodrigo C. Esperanza turned “heretic” when he began attending the Methodist church in his hometown. He became quite active in the young people’s activities of the local church. After high school he received an exhorter’s license and a scholarship offer to attend seminary. Turning from these to his youthful ambitions, America and education, he left for Seattle, Washington in 1926 to seek his fortune in the “promised land of equal opportunity,” the United States. God intervened to accomplish his will for him. Esperanza testified,

I was caught in the depression, and began to drift along with my own kind in Chinatown. My religious background was not enough to keep me, and I found myself in a life of sin. When filled with sorrow, discouraged and sick, someone invited me to attend a Full Gospel mission. The second night the Holy Spirit’s terrific conviction was upon me so that after the sermon, I rushed to the altar, and as soon as my knees hit the floor, I knew I was born again.⁹

Inner conflicts ensued. The choice was between studying chemistry or preparing for the ministry. He had promised his father that he would go back to his country as a self-made man with a title attached to his name. At a Sunday morning service he made a definite decision. As he sang with the congregation, he made his consecration in the words of the song,

⁹ “Presenting Rudy C. Esperanza, General Superintendent,” *The Pentecostal Voice* (Sep. 1956).

Though the way seems straight and narrow
All I claim was swept away.
My ambitions, plans and wishes
At my feet in ashes lay.

God gave him a love and burden for his own people in Seattle. With the encouragement of some Christian friends, he opened a Mission Hall where many Filipinos found Christ. He also helped maintain a Christian home for Filipinos where they could live away from the sinful influence of the bad section of the city.

While a student at Northwest Bible College, Esperanza was one time the president of the Islands of the Sea Missionary Prayer Band. He began contacting Pentecostal preachers in the Philippines like Pedro Z. Collado, Pedro Castro, Benito Acena, and Emil Bernaldes. Their letters gave him fragmentary information that they were working independently of one another.

Several Pentecostal groups helped the Filipino Full Gospel under his supervision. He did not know with what group he would affiliate. On New Year's Day 1938, the Spirit of the Lord spoke to him and said, "If you will be faithful to Me, someday I will make you a delegate to an international convention of the Assemblies of God in Springfield Missouri." This he kept to himself and took it as an indication of God's will for him to join the Assemblies of God.¹⁰ After graduation in June 1938 he visited some Filipino brethren in California and told them that he was going back to the Philippines to start a work in the name of the Assemblies of God. He learned that many Filipino Pentecostals in California had joined either the Filipino Assemblies of the Firstborn, the Foursquare, or the Church of God. Very few remained with the Assemblies of God. Some were uncommitted. One of the most pronounced Assemblies of God Filipino preachers then was Esteban Lagmay. Esperanza and Lagmay agreed to organize an Assemblies of God group. They contacted those who had leanings to the Assemblies of God and the uncommitted. Then they went to see the officers of the Northern California and Nevada District and Rev. Narver Gortner. They requested them to exert their influence at the denominational headquarters in Springfield, Missouri to send a missionary to the

¹⁰ In April 1964 Rodrigo C. Esperanza was the Philippine delegate to the 50th anniversary of the Assemblies of God in Springfield, Missouri where other foreign delegates participated. He wrote: "You can't possibly imagine the joy and amazement I had at the fulfillment of God's word which He had promised to me twenty-five years ago. I shook under the impact of the truth of God's word."

Philippines as previously requested by those already working in the Philippines. They were told that Springfield had a plan to send the Leland E. Johnson, a missionary formerly laboring in south China. Esperanza and Lagmay went to Oakland to meet Leland Johnson.

Esperanza arrived in Manila on May 9, 1939. He had a “welcome home” party in Rosario, Pozorrubio, Pangasinan. Preparations for a wedding feast were being made in his father’s house. The hundreds who attended the wedding dance and feast were his first congregation when he was asked to address the crowd that evening.

Most of the people knew him as the “Protestante” of the Esperanza family. Opposition later came from his family. He was asked to buy indulgences and spread a feast as a memorial service for his deceased mother, sister, and brother. He refused and took his stand, spending hours praying and interceding for souls. He faithfully preached every Sunday to a group in the old family house. In the evenings he preached in the open air in four outstations. Seven months later, many converts built a church and dedicated it on December 30, 1959. During those months he also had been contacting the Filipino Pentecostal preachers telling them of a plan to organize the Assemblies of God in the Philippines, and that a missionary couple was coming to help them.